

Dotting the Map with *The North Carolina Gazetteer*

By Kevin Cherry

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 44:2 (spring 2005).

North Carolina can claim some strangely named places. Iron Duff, Pig Basket Creek, Rabbit Shuffle, Relief, Aho, and Dirty Britches Creek are actual locations in the Tar Heel State. These names, along with those of more than twenty thousand other places and geographic features, fill the pages of *The North Carolina Gazetteer*. This important reference book records when North Carolina places were founded, when their names were first used (if known), and how the place-names came into existence.

Tar Heel places are named for animals and birds, trees, and even the wind. Forty-one places in North Carolina have the word elk in their names. The buffalo can claim even more namesakes. People have named their hometowns for politicians and soldiers, both the famous and the little known. A few places even carry the names of the infamous. In Caldwell County, Cajah's Mountain is named for Micajah, a man who was hanged there long ago. There are two Black Ankles in the state. Randolph County's Black Ankle is named for the burned ground left by bootleggers trying to trick Prohibition agents. Robeson County's Black Ankle is named after the local soil, which is reportedly so fertile that it leaves the farmers' ankles black when they walk through it. The town of Aurora in Beaufort County is credited to a newspaper, the *Aurora Borealis*. The town of Oriental took its name from a ship that wrecked nearby in 1852. And a man named the community of Lizard Lick for the many lizards he spotted licking the air as they sunned nearby. Quite a few places in the state have names that aren't polite, and some of them are a bit naughty. Well, naughty or not, if it weren't for *The North Carolina Gazetteer*, finding this sort of information would be quite difficult.

Creating the Gazetteer

William S. Powell is one of North Carolina's best-known and most prolific historians. He has written several books about his native state and its inhabitants. In 1951 Mr. Powell was working with a journal that a British merchant had written in the 1700s. This merchant had visited North Carolina and mentioned in his journal a number of places and bodies of water. These place-names were no longer used, and Mr. Powell could not find them on any old maps. A few months later, an airplane exploded over a small North Carolina community, and even though this place made the national news because of the crash, Mr. Powell could not locate it on a map. This same situation repeated itself several times over the next few years. In response, Mr. Powell began to record North Carolina place-names on index cards. He had kept index cards with interesting bits of historical

information on them for a number of years before this, but his geographical name cards began to greatly increase.

Just as some people collect baseball cards, Mr. Powell began to collect these North Carolina place-name cards. He looked at old maps and searched through old reports. He hunted down old lists. Whenever he discovered the name of a town, creek, county, or community, he wrote that name down on a card, along with any information he could find about where the place was, when it was named, and how it got its name. Then he arranged these geographic name cards by counties, and his collection grew rapidly. His wife, Virginia, helped to maintain his collection, and his children taught themselves card games with the index cards he did not need. Those cards almost became part of the family. Mr. Powell's collection really expanded after he asked local historians from across the state to help him. They provided information for places Mr. Powell had found and made suggestions for adding places he had missed.

For fifteen years, Mr. Powell directed the collection of North Carolina place-names by managing his card files. In 1968 the University of North Carolina Press merged Mr. Powell's organized cards into a book, *The North Carolina Gazetteer*. As with any major undertaking, the *Gazetteer* contains a few mistakes, and it doesn't capture every Tar Heel place. But thanks to the hard work of Mr. Powell, and his local historian friends, North Carolina can claim one of the most comprehensive gazetteers of any state. Because of North Carolina's *Gazetteer*, when a person reads about a creek in a journal from the 1700s or hears about an obscure Tar Heel place on the news, it's possible to pull a book from the shelf to discover more about that place. And Mr. Powell's *Gazetteer* has made it possible to know why a place might have a strange name.

At the time of this article's publication, Kevin Cherry was a visiting instructor in the Department of Library Science and Instructional Technology at East Carolina University's College of Education. William S. Powell has thoughtfully annotated Cherry's copy of *The North Carolina Gazetteer* to show that Denver, North Carolina, is the author's hometown.